

Walking Through the Desert on a Sunday Morning:

An Account of the 2011 Bataan Memorial Death March

By Captain Christine Keating

*The woods are lovely, dark, and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
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—Robert Frost¹

Imagine that it takes quite a bit to make an elite runner who is in fourth place at Mile 19 of a marathon stop dead in his tracks. But then again, an angry 200-pound pronghorn antelope qualifies as “quite a bit.” At this year’s Bataan Memorial Death March, where the course briefly overlaps itself along Miles 9 and 19, I watched in awe as an antelope—agitated by the huge crowd surging up the hill—sprang from the roadside brush and barreled directly into a runner who was already on the return trip. The boots that had been carrying the runner at a fast, steady cadence came to a screeching halt; hooves reared and turned back to the brush in a cloud of dust; neither man nor beast knew exactly what had just happened—not exactly what you would expect during your ordinary marathon.

But the Bataan Memorial Death March is no ordinary marathon, and these are no ordinary runners. They are not bantam, fleet-footed Kenyans. Rather, they are warriors—muscle-bound, boot-wearing Soldiers, Marines, Sailors, and Airmen—marching to honor the memory of the 70,000 American and Filipino prisoners of war who conducted the original 60-mile forced march through the Philippine jungle at the hands of their Japanese captors in April 1942.

This is the 22d annual memorial march. The 26.2-mile course winds its way through the desert of White Sands Missile Range, New Mexico, commanding more than

6,000 participants each year. There are separate categories for teams and individuals, civilians and military, and heavy (35-pound rucksack) and light (water only). However, few participants come here to run, and even fewer actually come to compete. Most come just to finish—and to honor those original prisoners of war.

We shiver in the predawn twilight as we await the opening ceremony. Bagpipes drone in the background. At 6:30 a.m., the microphone crackles to life and the crowd responds, gathering in a giant parking lot to hear the opening comments of the White Sands commanding general. We salute the flag as a country artist sings the national anthem. Then, we listen in solemn stillness as one of the surviving Bataan prisoners of war calls roll. When he gets to the names of those who can no longer answer, his voice is met with complete silence. “Taps” rings clear in the early morning air. If we didn’t already know why we were marching, we do now.

Two jets from neighboring Holloman Air Force Base roar overhead, and a cannon signals the official start of the race. The five of us maneuver as a team—weaving in and out of holes in the crowd. We’re in no hurry. We each have a time chip laced tightly to our boots, so our time won’t begin until we cross the start line. The event closes at 8:00 p.m., giving us 13 hours to complete the course; we’re hoping that we only need 7.

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We're not really sure if we've started yet. At the sound of the cannon, the crowd surged forward, but there is little indication of the actual race course. Thousands of marchers jostle good-naturedly toward what must be the start point. Then, with a race clock finally in sight, the crowd suddenly parts, drifting to the sides of the road. There, lining the road, sit original Bataan survivors, shaking the thousands of hands proffered them. These men (now old and few in number) neither chose nor wished to become icons—members of the Greatest Generation, battered by war and chance. Yet, they rose when called, survived the horrors of battle, and endured the subsequent agony of surrender and imprisonment. My teammates and I gently shake the hands of these accidental heroes, and then we step over the timing mat. The march has begun.

Our team consists of five Soldiers from the 110th Military Police Company “Hellraisers,” Fort Carson, Colorado—a perfect microcosm of the modern Military Police Corps. First, there is a private first class—a Mexican-American citizen whose father carried him, at the age of 3, on his shoulders across the Rio Grande. He is now one of the best mechanics in the company, and he dreams of someday opening his own mechanic shop back home to support his wife and three sons. Next is a military police specialist and Colorado native who delights in “smoking” the rest of the team on high-altitude workouts. One of our noncommissioned officers (a sergeant who has successfully held the position of platoon sergeant for weeks) is a quiet, humble combat veteran. The noncommissioned officer in charge of the team is a Puerto Rican internment/resettlement specialist who loves his job, but misses home.

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At his recent reenlistment ceremony, his beautiful 5-year-old daughter insisted on raising her right hand and taking the oath along with him. Finally, there's me. As the company commander, I was thrilled to have the chance to lead a team of Soldiers through such a challenging and rewarding event.

The first mile flies by. We are surrounded on all sides by our fellow marchers; the crowd is still thick and slow.

One gentleman walks along, deliberately ahead of us, wearing a sign on his back that says, “Made in the U.S.A., 1928.” He's doing the half-marathon, or “honorary route,” but his goal is to complete the full 26.2 miles next year—at the age of 84.

At Mile 4, we're 1 hour into the race. Despite the congested start and a desperate Mile 3 bathroom break, we're still on pace with 15-minute miles. Smiles and “high fives” all around. This isn't so bad after all!

By Mile 6, I'm starting to think that the previous assessment might have been a bit ambitious. One of our teammates is already starting to fall back, thinking too much about the impending hill and talking about stopping to change socks. Keeping the team together the whole way may turn out to be unrealistic. We will finish together, but we've each started to find our own pace for now.

Mile 7 brings the first full-blown aid point, with water, fruit, and medics. I don't want to stop, but we need to wait for everyone else to catch up. After an excruciating 20 minutes of sitting still, my hips angrily object when I prompt them to start moving again. I squeeze a packet of electrolyte goo down my throat and dig out my headphones 5 miles earlier than I had planned to plug in. The music helps get me going again, and I'm off.

At Mile 8, we hit pavement and my hips and knees are still protesting from their brief rest. I decide to break into a jog to loosen up; two of my teammates start running with me. This is our last chance to stretch out before hitting the long hill that covers Miles 9–13. It feels good to change up the routine a little. It also feels good to pass people.

At Mile 9, we are 2½ hours into the march. We meet the first runner on his way back, proudly sporting a National Guard singlet. We still have 17 miles to go, and our hope is bolstered by seeing runners already on their way back in. One by one, we cheer them on as they start trickling by. And then . . . the antelope incident. Absolutely surreal. We share incredulous looks and then laughingly cheer louder as the victim recovers, regains his rhythm, and breezes on down the hill.

At Mile 12, it's time to check our feet while we wait for the others to catch up. Army medics check on us and offer foot powder, bandages, ibuprofen, and more intense care for those who are beginning to realize that they're in over their heads. Our junior teammate discovers that his hydration pack has leaked all over his extra socks—his diabetic grandmother's compression socks. After ribbing him about the oh-so-stylish look, we offer up a dry pair of boot socks from our collective reserve and we're ready to hit the trail again. This is what a second wind feels like! The sun is shining, the breeze is blowing, and right now, we are part of something special. Life is good.

As the Mile 13 marker approaches, I am sick of electrolyte gel and my mind wanders longingly toward a cheeseburger. I tuck my head down, turn the music up, and try not to think about the nagging pain in my right knee. I'm hungry! And then, as I round the bend—God bless America! Someone is grilling hamburgers! I'm not hallucinating; there truly is a glorious cloud of charcoal smoke rising above the Mile 14 water point. I pull off the trail, praising every god I can think of for the improbable presence of this midrace oasis. And then reality hits: This manna from Heaven is not free. Someone is *selling* hamburgers. Who sells food along a race route? And who carries cash on a marathon? But then, I dully remember that I may have tucked a \$20 bill in with my identification card, which is in the outer pocket of my hydration pack. Too much effort would be required to take off the pack, find the money, wait in line, pay, and then start back up again. Grudgingly, I turn back to the trail. It's time to run again. My knees will thank me, and the memory of the cheeseburger that could have been will more quickly fade into the distance.

As I pick up the pace, my thoughts start to weave in and out of focus. I no longer control the stream of instructions flowing through my mind. *Pass the lady in green.* Check. *Find where the helicopter is coming from.* Check. *Blackhawk, nap of the earth.* Cool! *Medevac.* Not cool. *Say a quick prayer for whoever's getting flown out.* Check. *Don't knock over the guy with one leg.* Check.

The guy with one leg is the fourth amputee that I've passed today. This impressive class of marchers—the Wounded Warriors—has forced me to reevaluate my priorities. I'm grateful that my feet hurt, that my knees ache, and that my arms are starting to chafe at the shoulder seams of my uniform. All of this signifies that both of my legs and both of my arms are present for duty, intact,

and responsive. I have had the honor of deploying, and I have had the good luck of coming home whole. These men weren't so lucky. Some of them are marching on one leg. Some of them have only one arm. Before the race began, I even saw a double-leg amputee, prosthetics strapped on, hiking poles in hand, warming up and getting ready to go. I never saw him again, which probably means that he stayed in front of me the whole way. When I thanked one of these incredible warriors for marching with us, he surprised me with a quick smile. "It's my honor! And besides," he grinned, "at least I only have one foot that's hurting right now. It could always be worse!"

There are nearly 6,400 participants in today's march. Many are members of the military; many others are civilians marching in honor of a deceased service member. The words "In memory of . . ." are frequently seen on T-shirts or on flyers pinned to rucksacks. Teams of service members represent every branch of the military; guidons stream in the constant wind. There are Reserve Officer Training Corps cadets, Boy Scout troops, and high school sports teams. There are a remarkable number of couples who are walking hand in hand, as though on a regular Sunday morning stroll. And at least one of the marchers—93-year-old Ben Skardon—is an original Bataan Death March survivor. There is little need for an internal pep talk; all the inspiration that I need is walking right alongside me.

Mile 15 ticks by, and then Mile 16. I'm still hungry, and now I'm starting to get tired. Conflicting poems begin to battle in my head. Clement C. Moore's "visions of sugarplums" dance enticingly.² *What on earth is a sugarplum?* If it's anything like a chocolate peanut butter cup, I would kill for one right now. On the other hand, Robert Frost is admonishing me from beyond the grave, reminding me that I still have "miles to go before I sleep"—10.2 miles, to be exact.

I swear those miles are getting longer. My teammates and I have agreed to stop and link up every 6 miles, so my next opportunity to rest is still 2 miles away. I don't know if I'm looking forward to the stop—or dreading it. The respite will be more than welcome, but starting again will be even harder than it was the last time. The trail begins to wind, and suddenly I know where I am. I'm almost back to the point where the route loops back on itself—where the unfortunate runner got up close and personal with an enraged antelope hours earlier. Although there is still a long road ahead, it is comforting to know that I'm almost on familiar turf. Maybe there will be oranges and bananas

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where we meet back up with the road. Maybe I can run on the downhill stretch. Maybe—just maybe—I’ll actually finish this thing.

When Mile Marker 18 shows up, I pull to a stop and join our lightest and fastest teammate, who has already been casually pacing the roadside for several minutes. A formidable number of cacti line the trail, initially preventing me from sitting down. I finally find a bare patch and semicollapse onto the dirt. I’m sitting mere feet in front of the mile marker and have, thus, unwittingly become the subject of dozens of photographs as my fellow marchers document their progress along the route. “Here’s me at Mile 18!” their blogs will proudly proclaim. “And that’s some dusty Soldier who was too tired to move. Don’t ask me who she is.”

Twenty minutes later, our team is reassembled and we head back out together. I try to rein in the pace, but I now appreciate something that a friend told me following a Marine Corps marathon years ago. At that time, he recalled that he had wanted to walk at about Mile 17 but physically couldn’t, since by then, his body was so ingrained with the rhythm of running. I find it difficult to go any slower; my hips and knees are now precisely calibrated to a certain stride and pace. The slightest deviation results in a screaming protest from my midback to my toes. I put the headphones back in and lean downhill. They’ll catch up.

At the bottom of the hill, the White Sands Missile Range can be seen glittering in the distance. The road is lined with local police officers and firefighters who are directing traffic and supporting the marchers. There is now an unmistakable air of hope; although we still have 6 miles to go, we can see our objective growing closer. One of our teammates decides to high-five every police officer we pass; some are friendlier than others.

We continue to follow the road toward the post, but quickly discover that there’s a trick. Instead of heading straight in, the course turns to the right and enters what is known as the Sand Pit—a dishearteningly accurate name. The Sand Pit consists of a 2-mile stretch of ankle-deep sand that shifts and slides with every step. By now we are at Mile 21; and for the first time, I think, *This sucks!* We’ve been marching for nearly 7 hours, and my legs feel like lead. I can’t keep my rhythm without solid footing. *Don’t hit the wall now*, I think. *We’re too close to the finish!* For the first time all day, I slip into last place on our team. Now, I’m angry too. *Left, right, left, right.* I stare at the sand passing slowly between my feet. *Left, right, left, right.* The trail begins to curve. *This too shall pass.* Sure enough, the trail begins to ascend, and the sand gives way to harder-packed dirt. My feet actually stay where I put them. I shake my head and my legs, clearing out the sludge of the last 2 miles. I must catch up to my teammates. I shuffle along, regaining third place among my teammates.

We are now completely out of the sand and quickly approaching the main cantonment. The team is strung out again, so we pause at Mile 24 to reconsolidate. Marchers with angry, blistered feet are sitting on cots lining the road, boots off, attended to by medics who are attempting to patch them enough to make the last leg of the march. I can’t fathom taking my boots off right now. They would never go back on. But the volunteers here are serving cookies! This is the first time all day that I’ve had sustenance that requires chewing. I guess they save the best for last.

Our team will stay together for the rest of the race now—no matter what. I try to put things in perspective, reminding the team that the remaining distance is no longer than an ordinary Army physical fitness test. Somehow, that knowledge doesn’t make the last 2 miles any easier. The agave and yucca that had lined the route are

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slowly being replaced by long grasses; we are only feet away from the backyards of on-post housing. A chest-high stone wall separates us from easy chairs, ice-cold drinks, and air conditioning. But the stone wall might as well be the Great Wall. There's no going over it; there's no quitting now. After an impossibly long time, the small brown sign signifying Mile 25 comes into view.

If we're going to break 8 hours, we have 18 minutes remaining. At the beginning of the march, a mile easily fell away in 13 or 14 minutes. But now, we're going to have to push the last mile. Spectators line the route, helping to boost our spirits. A handful of grade school children sit on the wall, cheering and declaring that we are "way cooler" than they are. An older man, clearly a marcher who has already finished, saunters by holding a beer and hollering that there are cold ones at the finish line. My empty, dehydrated stomach roils at the thought. *No thanks!* I think. *But good for you, Buddy.*

The 8-hour milestone looms large, prompting us to move faster. Some of us are jogging, some are speed walking; but the whole team is moving together—faster than we have since Mile 6. Now there are 11 minutes left, and still no sign of Mile 26. Seven minutes left. We begin to hear the cheering. Five minutes. We round the last curve, and the finish line bursts into view. The whole team is running now. Bystanders shout our team number in encouragement as we fly by. "Go 101!" "Way to finish, 101!" We have less than a hundred meters to go. We're going to make it!

The Hellraisers cross the finish line together at 7 hours, 57 minutes. We place seventh of twenty teams in the military coed light division—not bad for our first time. There are blisters, swollen joints, and sunburns; but more importantly, there are camaraderie, honor, and gratitude. We sought out a challenge as a company, as a team, and as individuals; and we met that challenge head-on. We've been there, done that, and gotten the T-shirt. Literally.

Back at the hotel later that night, a few of us limp our way down to the lobby. Clad in sweats and flip-flops, we appear to be a far cry from the hardened Soldiers who pushed through 26.2 miles of sand, hills, and pain earlier in the day. But a few hours removed from the march, nursing glasses of ice water, we are now able to sit and reflect on the importance of what we accomplished. We were part of the largest crowd in Bataan Memorial Death March history—a crowd that came together from 5 nations, all 50 states, and all branches of the military to commemorate the courage and sacrifice of the "Battling Bastards of Bataan," as they called themselves. As Americans, we honored their commitment to our freedom. As Soldiers, we sought in some small way to share their struggle and their spirit.

Each of us made a promise, implicit in the oath we took when we raised our right hands, to remember and honor those who took that same oath before us. More than any memorial constructed of brick and brass and more than any headstone carefully adorned with pebbles, the physical effort of marching keeps the sacrifice of our predecessors alive and relevant. With each step, we more vividly remembered those who came before us, their dusty ghosts falling into step alongside us. Bataan was everything a memorial marathon should be—long, challenging, painful, and inspiring.

Will we be back? Oh yes—for we have promises to keep and miles to go before we sleep. Miles to go before we sleep.

Endnotes:

¹Robert Frost, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," *New Hampshire*, 1922.

²Clement C. Moore, "A Visit From St. Nicholas" (later known as "The Night Before Christmas"), 1822.

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